

Testimony of Wendy Yagarich, Director of Programs
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Public Hearing on the Governor's Proposed Budget Adjustments

Please, do not support Governor Malloy's plan to eliminate Family Empowerment and Family School Connection Programs. My name is Wendy Yagarich, Director of Programs, at Madonna Place, Inc. a family support agency in Norwich. The desired result of our services is that children in New London County will develop in safe and nurturing families.

I manage the Family Empowerment Program (FEP) that supports young fathers who are under the age of 23 years. This program works in a prevention manner to teach young fathers how to care for and nurture their new born children. We use the curriculum "Doctor Dad" from the National Fatherhood Initiative. This curriculum covers how to care for a sick, injured, and healthy child as well as how to ensure a safe home for an infant. This course also has a component on the prevention of shaken baby syndrome. Conclusive research evidence shows that fathers are critical to the health and wellness of children, especially infants. For example, a study from 1990 showed that fathers participating in prenatal activities were associated with **Higher** birth rates. The FEP program has a proven record of effectively engaging young fathers in supportive services at two critical points, prenatally and soon after the birth of a child. The program not only helps them learn parenting skills, it conducts case management to help fathers establish paternity, custody orders, co-parenting plans, and financial support agreements. The majority of young fathers enrolled in both educational groups and case management services. We exceeded our contractual obligations for the last seven years. CT has wisely invested in FEP programs and the bottom line cost is not expensive. **This is not the time to eliminate programming for CT's underserved and vulnerable populations, young fathers and their children.**

Madonna Place, Inc.-Family Empowerment Program highlights include (2008 – 2012) include:

- Over 200 young fathers (under 23 years) served over the last seven years
- Nearly 80% completion rate among all enrolled
- Majority of graduates increased knowledge of parental skills and increased confidence in using those skills
- Majority of graduates are knowledgeable on ways to sooth a crying baby
- Fathers report enjoying the class and majority report appreciation and satisfaction with services
- Nearly 30 dads used the services to establish paternity and/or custody orders

Family School Connection (FSC) programs are located in Hartford, New Haven, and Norwich. This is a **prevention program** that provides comprehensive home visiting and support services for families whose children are frequently absent, truant, have academic or behavior problems, or often come to school unprepared. In addition, the program provides services to parents who are not adequately engaged with the school or attending to their child's educational needs. **Children who are not getting their needs met are at greater risk for developmental, behavioral and health issues – issues that too often lead to school failure.** Our FSC program is housed in Wequonnoc and John M. Moriarty Elementary schools in Norwich. Both of these schools are mandated to have school governance councils and have a dedication to increasing parental involvement. Furthermore, these schools and many families whose children attend need our services.

The goals of FSC are to improve parenting skills and help families support their child's educational success. To accomplish this, home visitors meet with families on a regular basis. We use evidence based curriculum to facilitate the learning of parenting skills. Home visitors support the families in making better connections with the school, teachers and other officials. A major role of program staff is to help parents address issues that are interfering with their ability to meet the needs of the child. Cutting funding for this program will leave many families with less support and in turn will affect children's education. The program is an innovative program that supports parents and can have a positive impact on students' performance. **Cutting this program is not aligned with Governor Malloy's plan to close the achievement gap.** Basically, the Governor is saying we need to address the educational problems in our state by cutting funds for an existing program and dedicating new funds to new programs. That is not sound thinking and such actions will be costly and take time. Simply put this program and parents are part of the solution to closing student achievement gaps. Thus, Family School Connection programs are worth preserving.

Family School Connection is evaluated by the University of Hartford Center for Social Research. Highlights from past evaluations (2007 – 2011) include:

- Parents who participate in the program develop healthier attitudes about parenting and experience less parental stress
- Parents become more involved in their children's education and in their child's lives
- Parents are more accepting and have more realistic expectations about their children. Data indicates that families have less rigid parenting attitudes and are less likely to treat their children forcefully.

Please, understand that cutting essential programs that support parents and children is not a wise decision. In these times, more of our neighbors are facing hard times. Many of them turn to community programs for support. Our agency is inundated with families in need. Having the state's full support to work with young fathers and parents of school aged children is a necessity for the greater good of the community. **Please do not cut funding to Family Empowerment and Family School Connection Programs, parents and children in CT are counting on you!**

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